

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 50 | Number 4 (Spring 1990)

pps. 407-409

The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture." *The Annals of Iowa* 50 (1990), 407-409.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9429>

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Book Reviews

The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture, by James R. Shortridge. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989. xiv, 201 pp. Notes, charts, illustrations, index. \$25.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT F. MARTIN, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

In the introduction to this absorbing volume, James Shortridge suggests that his "unconventional geography" (xiii) has been influenced by a small group of humanists within the profession. Certainly Shortridge's study of the Middle West is not what the lay reader ordinarily expects to encounter in the work of a geographer. In part this is because the scope and methodology of the discipline is broader than often believed, and in part because the author's approach to the subject is imaginative and eclectic.

Shortridge's difficult task is to trace the identity and location of the Midwest over time. At the heart of midwestern identity, both within and outside the region, he finds an agrarian myth that has persisted even when clearly inconsistent with reality. As a result, periodic reassessments of the meaning and location of the region have been necessary.

Shortridge believes that the idea of the Midwest as a distinct region originated in the late nineteenth century. Throughout much of the century, when Americans thought in terms of sections they meant the East, South, and West; what we now call the Midwest was known as the West, Northwest, Old Northwest, or Central Great Lakes. The designation *Middle West* probably came into use during the 1880s and was applied primarily to Kansas and Nebraska and, to a lesser extent, Iowa and Missouri. During the first decade of the twentieth century the term *Middle West* was applied to a wider region but with little consistency. Some used it to define an area from Omaha to Buffalo while others believed it should apply only to the Old Northwest Territory. *Middle West* came into its own as a regional designation around 1912. By that time most people considered the Middle West to consist of the five states of the Old Northwest, along with Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa, and Missouri.

At about the same time that the Middle West was developing a distinct geographic identity, according to Shortridge, it also began to

assume a cultural identity. He contends that the agricultural depression and the intersectional tensions that developed between the East and the Central Plains states were instrumental in shaping the Middle West's sense of identity. Financially hard-pressed and seeking an explanation or a scapegoat for troubles they had not anticipated and often did not understand, many midwesterners, especially those from the western portion of the region, attributed at least some of their troubles to the activities of eastern economic and political elites.

Two themes emerged as residents of the region sought to distinguish themselves from what they perceived as the urban, industrial, ethnically diverse, and, by implication at least, decadent East. One was agrarian: midwesterners developed an image of themselves and their region that was rather Jeffersonian. Rural and small-town midwesterners were said to be self-reliant, God-fearing, egalitarian democrats who were building a society in which social and economic status were products of ability and merit. The region's citizenry were simple, hard-working, genuine, moral people, the backbone of the nation as it was meant to be. The other theme involved a life-cycle analogy. Americans traditionally thought of the West as youthful while they regarded the East as having attained a measure of maturity. Until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most people considered the Middle West a part of the West. After the depression of the 1890s, however, the Middle West seemed to many to have lost at least some of the less desirable characteristics of youth. Midwesterners perceived their region as retaining certain youthful qualities – among them individualism, resourcefulness, and optimism – but believed that it had outgrown less beneficial adolescent traits such as thriftlessness and radicalism. They felt that their section had achieved a vigorous maturity while the East had passed its prime and was experiencing the degeneration of old age. Meanwhile, the West remained young and vital but subject to the foibles of youth.

By the 1910s these pastoral and life-cycle themes had coalesced into a third idea, that of the Midwest as representing the essence of America. In this view, as the character of eastern civilization changed, becoming more urban, industrial, and culturally diverse, the Midwest became the stronghold of a way of life and system of values that had made the nation great. Shortridge argues that since the 1920s several circumstances have undermined the Middle West's national image and eroded the region's sense of identity. The agrarian myth that the author contends lies at the heart of midwestern regional consciousness no longer seems relevant to many residents of an urban industrial nation. Furthermore, the economic problems that have beset the farm economy throughout much of the twentieth century have caused some mid-

westerners to question the efficacy of their agricultural way of life. Finally, since the population and economic base of significant portions of the Midwest is no longer rural, a redefinition or relocation of the region is warranted and, Shortridge believes, has in fact already occurred. He contends that the center of the region has shifted westward in the popular imagination to Kansas and Nebraska, leaving the more urban industrial areas of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio only marginally midwestern.

James Shortridge draws upon the tools of historical, sociological, and literary scholarship as well as those of his own discipline in an effort to better understand the physical and cultural geography of an ill-defined section of the nation. While some readers may find much of the volume imprecise and impressionistic, the author has done an admirable job of dealing with matters that are largely subjective. His study is well organized, lucid, imaginative, and evocative. The growing number of scholars interested in the study of the Middle West will find this volume a valuable addition to their libraries.

Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas, by Robert Smith Bader. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988. xi, 241 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$17.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY CRAIG MINER, WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

When thinking about the image of Kansas, it should be remembered that Coronado strangled the guide who led him there, and that the Kansas scenes in the movie version of the Wizard of Oz are shot in black and white. In this well-written and broadly researched analysis Bader admits that Kansas has always had an "image problem," but finds that the state was not considered "irrelevant" until the 1930s, when it added a self-imposed inferiority complex to the external criticism.

Bader loves Kansas, and regrets that he was not born there. He has gathered a variety of sources, including novels, art, science fiction, film, essays, television, jokes, and *New Yorker* cartoons. His analysis is objective as well as subjective, as in his quantification of such items as the volume of articles on Kansas compared to surrounding states in the *New York Times* over several decades. He has a good eye for quotation. William Allen White's statement that "a first rate poet in Ford County would do more to bring Western Kansas into the approval of mankind than a packing house" is the perfect illustration of one of Bader's points. The title of the book comes from Henry L. Mencken,

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